



Building Authentic Donor Relationships

## **Major Donor Weekend—A Case Study**

Fundraisers we are always looking for ways to bring major donors together to help deepen their relationship with their organization. We know that donors who are more engaged with your mission are more likely to invest in it.

At Veritus Group, we are constantly thinking of ways to increase that level of engagement with major donors. One effective way to reach your donors in a very intimate way is to create a "Major Donor Weekend." This weekend allows a small group of committed donors to come together with the intent on creating an atmosphere where donors will invest in the future of your organization. Recently, Veritus Group helped design the strategy and implementation of such a weekend for one of our clients. Below is a case study:

### Type of Client

International Mission Sending Agency. They serve over 130 missionaries around the world with services and support to help them do their work overseas. Additionally, this organization provides resources and materials for pastors and their congregations for discipleship training and renewal in their lives.

This client has annual revenue of \$10,000,000, \$500,000 is raised annually from donors while missionaries raise their own personal support for their expenses.

### The Opportunity

The Organization would like to expand its reach to pastors and congregations with their resources and discipleship training. They have identified a need in the Reformed Theology Christian market for these resources and services. The cost to meet this need over the next three years is \$1.25MM.

### The Strategy

While there were a couple of donors that have the ability to fund the vast majority of this opportunity, Veritus Group helped identify 6-8 couples who have demonstrated they have the resources and the passion to invest in this specific need and fund between \$250-\$300K per year.

These couples have all participated in the services and have used the resources of this organization and have had a significant positive experience with them. Therefore, the strategy was to create a way for them to come together, share that experience with others, learn about this new opportunity and be asked to help fund it.

We decided to create a weekend at a resort for these couples to come together and hear about this new, exciting opportunity and make a direct "ask" to help fund this project over the next three years.

## Implementation/ What we learned

### Organizational Expectations

It was imperative that the organization's leadership was in agreement with the goals and budget for this strategy. This was the first time this organization ever conducted such a strategy for their major donors and some folks were nervous about the outcome. This is to be expected, however, if budget and revenue expectations are stated upfront and become part of the overall plan it helps calm nerves.

Typically, with a major donor weekend like this, the organization pays for the accommodations and meals. The donor pays for their transportation and entertainment, tips etc. However, as you will read below it's a good idea to run this idea by a couple of the influencers in the group beforehand to know what is acceptable with your group.

### Understand Your Audience

1. Plan at least a year in advance—bringing 12 high net-worth individuals together is a challenge. However, if you can plan a special weekend at least a year in advance you should be able to get folks together. This event was held in late September, and the planning started in August the preceding year.
2. Pre-sell the event to influencers—in order to help get folks “on board” with the event, the Executive Director first communicated with two individuals who could have influence on the other couples we were interested in inviting. This is key. These two donors gave us invaluable information on where it was appropriate to hold the event, who to invite, and feedback on the project to fund and what they wanted in a weekend away.
3. Location of event—there will be a healthy tension here. While we didn't want to be lavish, as the organization is very concerned with efficiency of resources, we also wanted our guests to be comfortable AND to create a fun destination for them. The organization made sure the donors would find the destination of the high quality they were used to. This is important. It's not about the organization; it's about the donors.

### Manage the Details

1. Project Manager—we cannot underestimate how important it is to have one or two people assigned to handle the hundreds of details that go into planning an event like this. For this particular event we had two project managers; one who handled all details prior to the event and one on-site. This could be the same person, but in our case we had two project managers. Both were invaluable in making sure our donors felt cared for and comfortable.
2. On-site manager—we specifically had one person manage details in coordination with the resort staff. Many times during the weekend this person was called on to make sure donors had what they needed, advocated for the donor with resort staff and made sure all the details were executed properly.

### Create Value Beyond Asking

We feel it's important to provide solid content for these couples beyond talking to them about the project and asking them to invest in it. Therefore, since all of these couples had been involved in the services of the organization, we provided a “mini-experience” for them during the weekend where they felt renewed in their faith. We brought a “known” pastor and his wife to provide the content throughout the weekend, which not only was individually satisfying, but brought the group together. This organization actually created a high-end journal for donors to use during the weekend that added more content for the donor.

## Selling the Project

1. No surprises—a major donor weekend should not have any surprises when it comes to what you are going to be asking of the donor. Prior to the weekend, each donor couple received a written proposal of the project we were going to discuss, along with budgets. Additionally, the Executive Director called each donor couple to ask if they had any concerns or questions about the proposal.
2. Donor buy-in—getting donor buy-in is key to the project. The worst thing that can happen is that a few of the donors don't like the opportunity and will spoil the opinions of others in the group. We wanted every donor to make sure they bought into the project and liked the overall concept. The only thing left outstanding was how much they were willing to invest in the project.
3. Creating a solid presentation—while each donor couple received a proposal in advance, much time and preparation went into the actual presentation. The presentation was held on Saturday night, the last night of everyone's time together. The presentation was no more than one hour long and it invited questions from the group. For us, one key was to have the person in charge of the actual project on site to present and take questions. Don't think the ED will know all the details of projects that donors will want to know. In this particular presentation the ED started the presentation with a 10 minute introduction then gave it over to the Director in charge of the project, only coming back at the end to make the "ask".
4. Making the ask—while all the donors were in the presentation, our project manager was able to deliver personalized reply forms and information to each donor's room. That way, when the donors came back from the evening, they had all the information needed to make a decision. After the formal presentation, the ED actually took the donors through a sample reply form and gave them clear instructions on how they could make their pledge.

## The Schedule

1. Expectations—Donors were made aware of the weekend schedule well in advance of the actual event. Going back to no surprises, donors actually appreciate knowing what the weekend will entail. Do not keep your donors guessing. Follow your schedule and communicate immediately if anything changes.
2. Fun—It's important that you allow ample time for the donors to relax and enjoy themselves. Filling an entire weekend with content will do you no favors with donors. This event started late afternoon on a Friday and ended after lunch on Sunday. Donors had mid-evenings to relax and all afternoon on Saturday to golf, sleep or take in an outdoor adventure.
3. Keep to it—stick to your schedule. Sure, you need to be flexible, but donors will expect you to stay with what you said you were going to do. If you're canceling things at the last minute or changing plans because someone might not want to do something, you run the risk of creating havoc for the other donors. Donors will appreciate you providing structure to the weekend.

## Seek Feedback

Before the final lunch together we sought the feedback of the donors. This was invaluable. Here are some things we learned from the donors.

1. Everyone loved the location for the event. They liked the fact that we chose a location that was attractive to them. Remember, most high-net worth folks have done an extensive amount of traveling. They want to go to interesting places.
2. They loved getting to know new folks—this was the most surprising, yet when looking back on it, one of the greatest benefits for these donors. By the end of the weekend these donors bonded. They got to know each other and created friendships. One donor

- said they couldn't wait to "plan the reunion." And, guess what? This organization will always be remembered for getting this particular group together.
3. Donors remarked about how they felt cared for and had no idea that this organization could pull something like this off. Then the best comment was, "I want to invite my friends to the next event." That's gold!!
  4. A day after the event the on-site project manager sent pictures, shared e-mail addresses and wrote great thank you e-mails sent from the ED to the donors. This elicited great feedback again from donors.
  5. Project Follow up—another important item is to let donors know how and when you are going to follow up with them on the project itself. Most of these donors were savvy business people and they expect evaluation. Make sure you are clear about this and then follow up.

### Final Thoughts

1. The event was a huge success. We garnered over \$300,000 in pledges over three years above and beyond their normal giving and surpassed our revenue expectations.
2. We kept the total cost to just under \$15,000 in total. That included paying for 4 staff members to attend the event, meals and accommodations for everyone attending. That's an incredible ROI. And, for this particular organization, a tremendous amount of money.
3. Little things make a difference—during the weekend the project manager bought small but appropriate gifts for each donor to remember the weekend. The positive comments were effusive in praise. We even received comments about the pledge cards waiting for them in their rooms—donors thought that was a nice touch.
4. The Executive Director invited his wife to attend with him. For this particular event it was perfect.
5. Practice the presentation—we spent many hours working with the ED and Director to make sure the presentation was on target. Remember, most of our donors were very successful business people who expect solid presentations. There were many kind remarks about the presentation.
6. Building community—one of the added benefits of holding an event like this is allowing donors to come together to network and create friendships. This has already proven to be powerful for this organization. Already donors have been contacting their friends and new major donors have come on board to fund this project. Secondly, the donors are still talking to each other and cultivating the relationships they made at this event. Nothing but positive things can come from that. During the event, the presentation created emotion that certainly helped donors in their final investment decision. When people come together for a common purpose powerful things happen.

If you are looking for another way to raise "investment" dollars for your organization, creating a major donor weekend, event or retreat can be a great way to bring donors together and fund important projects for your organization.

If you have further questions and want to talk about more details surrounding a major donor weekend feel free to give me a call at 267-254-2939 or e-mail me at [jschreifels@veritusgroup.com](mailto:jschreifels@veritusgroup.com).